How Beginner’s Luck Works and How You Can Reproduce It Anytime (Even If You’re Not a Beginner)

At some point in your life you’ve won a game you’ve never played before or witnessed a young child say or create something with worldly depth. These are both examples of events we attribute to something called beginner’s luck, as if chance caused them to happen. The reality is that the effects of this supposed beginner’s luck have very real causes that can be reproduced under the right circumstances. Here’s how the phenomenon works and how you can use that information to incite good fortune when you need it.

Beginner’s Luck Doesn’t Exist

First things first, beginner’s luck doesn’t actually exist. This post is going to deconstruct the phenomenon that is often so surprising, so it’s first important to understand what we’re actually talking about. There are many reasons a novice can perform well, but we have to remember that they often perform poorly. Confirmation bias, or our desire to only accept evidence that affirms our strongly-held beliefs, is likely at work when we see beginner’s luck in action. If you were to see an expert lose to a novice, it’s easy to buy into the concept because it’s exciting and widely believed that this kind of luck exists. What’s probably happening in this moment is you’re neglecting to realize the causes surrounding why this
beginner performed so well. They could have a similar skill that aided them, the expert could be
tired and underfed (causing them to think poorly), and the novice could be new to the task but
have still done it before and failed multiple times. When you accept beginner's luck as an
explanation, you're throwing out all sorts of data that could easily justify what happened.

How Beginner's Luck Occurs

The idea of beginner's luck can be caused by a number of sources. Let's take a look at each of
them and why their misinterpreted as chance.

To the Beginner, Anything Is Possible

We're often surprised and amazed by the
way children think. They see things in ways
we'd never think to see them, and there's a
reason for that. It's well-explained in this
quote from Buddhist monk and teacher
Shunryu Suzuki:

In the beginner's mind there are many
possibilities, but in the expert's there are few.

A novice, like a child, isn't encumbered by experience and therefore hasn't convinced themselves
of the right or wrong moves in a particular situation. This can be dangerous because it means
they may try something stupid, but it can also be hugely beneficial because it means they'll find
a more creative solution and take worthwhile risks. Experts draw upon their experience, which
has its own advantages, but provides them with a limited scope. Because a beginner's behavior
has so many possibilities, it can put an expert off of his or her game very easily. Experts develop
strategies and habits, making it easier to dissect and understand their choices. Because a novice
will often exhibit capricious behavior, it's difficult to expect what they'll do. When an expert tries
to analyze a strategy that isn't really a strategy at all, that expert is likely to fail and the beginner
is likely to win.

In a non-competitive setting, this is also extremely relevant. If you've ever worked on a software
development team, you hopefully know the importance of testing your software with ordinary
people. It's very easy to lose perspective on a project when you're familiar with nearly everything
about it. Consulting someone who has little-to-no familiarity with your work will provide areeze fresh perspective and may provide you with better answers than you can offer yourself.

Experts Choke Under Pressure

When you're great at something, you're
under a lot of pressure to continue to
perform at that high level. This can cause
you to choke under pressure, even when up
against a complete novice. Sian Beilock,
author of Choke, explains what happens to
your brain under pressure:

A lot of the explanation can be boiled
down to the fact that, under pressure,
the prefrontal cortex (the very front
part of our brain that sits over our eyes) stops working the way it should. This can result
in a lack of brain power available for demanding thinking and reasoning tasks (e.g.,
taking a test, responding to on-the-spot questions to a client) because worries about
messing up co-opt these brain resources. However, under pressure, we also often try and
control what we are doing in an attempt to ensure success. Too much attention to the
Details of activities that are best left outside conscious awareness (e.g., in golf, too much attention devoted to how your elbow is bent as you take a 3-foot putt you have holed thousands of times in the past) can disrupt a fluent performance and make you miss the hole.

Beginners don’t have these issues because they don’t particularly care how they perform. In all likelihood, they assume they’re going to lose when they’re going up against someone with a great amount of skill. When you don’t care about the outcome, you’re not encumbered by the pressure to perform. You don’t have experience to draw upon, so you can’t try to do so even if you wanted to. When an expert is set to choke and a novice manages to make a few good choices, the beginner’s win has little to do with luck and a lot more to do with two brains operating very differently.

Experts May Trust Their Intuition Too Much

Just as over-thinking can cause an expert to choke, trusting their gut can cause problems as well. Most experts have some sort of muscle memory for the things they do and that generally works fine in predictable situations. When up against a beginner, or in an unusual situation, it can be a recipe for failure.

Muscle memory generally refers to physical actions, but it’s really just a set of common instructions stored in your brain that are more generally referred to as procedural memories. Wikipedia offers a good explanation for what they do and how they’re created:

Procedural memory is memory for how to do things. Procedural memory guides the processes we perform and most frequently resides below the level of conscious awareness. When needed, procedural memories are automatically retrieved and utilized for the execution of the integrated procedures involved in both cognitive and motor skills; from tying shoes to flying an airplane to reading. Procedural memories are accessed and used without the need for conscious control or attention. Procedural memory is a type of long-term memory and, more specifically, a type of implicit memory. Procedural memory is created through “procedural learning” or, repeating a complex activity over and over again until all of the relevant neural systems work together to automatically produce the activity. Implicit procedural learning is essential to the development of any motor skill or cognitive activity.

In many cases, you’ll develop them without realizing it. These procedural memories can be extremely useful for repeat tasks, but as soon as you’re thrown in a new situation or are up against a capricious opponent you’re suddenly at a disadvantage. Your hard-wired routines can cause you to act quickly without thinking, and that equals a mistake if the routine doesn’t fit the task. Beginner’s might be slower at the same task, but they’re not already programmed to handle it a certain way. Their procedural memory is blank when they come to the table, so they can give the idea the right amount of thought before they act.

How to Fabricate Beginner’s Luck for Yourself (Even If You’re Not a Beginner)
The three previously mentioned sources of the beginner's luck phenomenon point to a few issues and disadvantages that you gain when you become good at something. It isn’t easy to rid yourself of these problems, and you don’t necessarily want to in many situations, but thinking like a novice can give you a greater advantage in your work and in many competitive circumstances as well. Here’s what you need to do to make your own beginner’s luck:

- In every situation, consider what you’ve seen before and what’s different. You can approach similar situations with your expertise, but don’t apply that same experience to anything new.
- Consider crazy ideas and strategies. The best ones often begin that way.
- When you’re sure something won’t work, consider it anyway.
- If you have an idea you really like but are afraid to try it, that’s probably a good sign. The more afraid you are to share something you really like, the more likely that it is a unique idea and a worthwhile risk.
- If you find yourself under pressure and over-thinking, listen to your gut instead of your brain. If you’re under-thinking and acting too quickly, step back and take a moment to consider your options.
- Think like a kid. Consider the problem from the perspective of someone who doesn’t have your knowledge and how they would look for a solution. Throw away everything you know for a moment and look at what you see. You might encounter an answer far better than anything your experienced mind would normally produce.

This obviously takes a bit of practice, but it’s something you can put into practice in your work every day. It’ll keep you thinking fresh, just like a beginner.

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